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Orbit

The sun orbits the earth, as anyone can plainly see. Except, of course, that it doesn't.

From our subjective viewpoint the sun seems to be circling the earth. From an objective viewpoint – looking into our solar system from the outside – we see the earth is orbiting the sun.

There is a similar problem in theology. We are born not knowing that we are in Christ and that in him we have ascended to heaven (Eph. 2:6, Col. 3:1-4). From our subjective viewpoint we are lost – we don't know where we are (in Christ) or who we are (the Father's beloved children).

Then a day comes when we stop believing we're lost and believe that Jesus has saved us. From our subjective viewpoint we say "I was saved when I believed."

In fact, however, from the objective viewpoint we were saved when the incarnate Son took us up with him in his resurrection and ascension 2,000 years ago.

Subjectively we say the sun "rises" and "sets." We know the sun is not moving; the earth is. There's no harm in using subjective language to describe how the sun appears to us, so long as we don't think that our subjective perspective is the actual, objective truth. We can say the sun is "rising" as long as we don't therefore think that the earth is the center of the solar system.

Likewise, in theology, there's nothing wrong with speaking of our "moment of salvation" so long as we don't think that our subjective perspective is the same as the objective reality.

Unfortunately, many of us think that we are not saved until we say it is so and that we are not included in the life of the Father, Son, and Spirit until we have included ourselves by our faith.

But how could that be, really? How could we creatures adopt ourselves into the life of the Triune Creator by anything we do or think? It's not possible. (Rom 10:6). The only way we can be children of the Father is if he makes us so, in and through his Son.

And that is exactly what he has done with humanity. He has adopted us into the circle of his life with the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Like our ancestors staring up at the sky, we don't always do a good job of distinguishing our subjective experience from the objective reality. So we've made our relationship with the Triune God too complicated.

When people realized the earth orbited the sun, one factor that convinced astronomers was the complicated nature of the earth-centered model. In a model based on our subjective experience, where we think the sun is orbiting us, the calculation of eclipses and the motions of stars and planets becomes needlessly complicated. Many astronomers were convinced when they saw the relative simplicity of the truth that the sun is at the center.

There are similar problems in theology. One is the fate of unbaptized children. For centuries we have evaluated them from our subjective experience and created needlessly complicated calculations involving "limbos" and "ages of accountability."

When we view life through the objective reality that all are reconciled in Christ, we find a simple solution. Unbaptized children are saved by Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, not by their own work of faith. Therefore they are safe with the Father, Son, and Spirit forever. End of discussion, no need for unbiblical and non-Christ-centered theologies like the age of accountability.

It's not always easy to see what's really happening around us. In the absence of other information, we would agree with the ancients that the sun is circling the earth. Without the revelation of Jesus Christ we might think we need to work to get to God.

Because Christ has come we can see the truth: he has taken us up with him into heavenly places.

This is what we celebrate on this Ascension Sunday. The truth that the whole creation is Christ-centered. Christ doesn't orbit the cosmos, watching us from a distance. The cosmos orbits Christ; the Son is the center of our world, our universe, and our lives. He has taken us up in his life, he has gotten himself into our hearts, and he has made us a part of his relationship with his Dad.

He is risen, and he has raised us up with him!

~ Jonathan Stepp